



Behind the Scenes at American Anthropologist

Review by Marc Lange

March 15, 2021

Michael Chibnik, 2020, *Scholarship, Money, and Prose: Behind the Scenes at an Academic Journal*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 232 pp., ISBN 978-0-8122-5217-0

Keywords: academia, anthropology, journal, scholarly publishing, work

Publishing is essential in academia. Its inner workings and daily business are however rarely written about. A welcome exception is *Scholarship, Money, and Prose*, in which Michael Chibnik offers the reader a profound behind-the-scenes look of *American Anthropologist* (AA), the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association. Mostly based on Chibnik's time as editor-in-chief of AA from 2012 to 2016, the book is a personal account of his experiences and probably best described by himself as “a perhaps unusual hybrid of an ethnography and a memoir” (p. viii). The book broadly falls within the anthropology of work but is of interest to anthropology at large.

The book is well structured with its main text divided into an introduction and eight chapters with clearly distinguished subjects. In the introduction, Chibnik recounts his way to his editorial position at AA and sets the stage for the following chapters by providing context about academic journals in general and about AA in particular.

In the first chapter, Chibnik explores AA's history from its first issue in 1888 to just before his arrival as editor-in-chief in 2012. He focuses on the tensions and controversies that shaped the journal's direction, the editors and their different visions, and the changing composition of the journal. He illustrates how AA started out as a four-field journal with mostly descriptive, generalizing content without much variety

or topicality, and how over time it became more diverse in content as well as editor- and authorship and how it increasingly addressed contemporary issues, while being more and more dominated by sociocultural anthropology.

The second chapter is a vivid retelling of the months immediately before and after becoming editor-in-chief of *AA*. Chibnik describes how he applied for the editorial position, his interview before the search committee and how, after being selected, he assembled the editorial board and the many necessary editorial positions.

The next three chapters are a detailed insight into the review and editorial processes of *AA*. In chapter three, Chibnik elucidates his handling of the submitted manuscripts and on the organization of the peer review, particularly detailing his experiences with the reviewers and providing informative short statistics on the reviews. In the fourth chapter, he illustrates how he evaluated the manuscripts and made decisions by providing anonymized excerpts from decision letters that he sent to authors. He also openly explains how he dealt with submissions on topics he had a personal preference or dislike for and how he tried to maintain the balance of content from the four fields of anthropology in *AA*. Chapter five is solely devoted to the writing and style of manuscripts and Chibnik's attempts to improve *AA*'s readability. Obviously an important issue for Chibnik, he animatedly talks about the often unclear writing by anthropologists, the overuse of jargon, the challenges of technical language, and the formal requirements imposed on manuscripts.

The focus of chapter six, perhaps the densest chapter, is the various kinds of material presented in *AA* and its therefore magazine-like quality. Chibnik gives insights in the creation of the regular and irregular features of the journal. In the process, he reviews noteworthy incidents, responses and controversies of the time of his editorship.

The seventh chapter is devoted to the business aspects of publishing *AA*. The complex finances of the journal are outlined, in particular the funding, the financial outlook and the profit sharing between the publisher Wiley-Blackwell and the American Anthropological Association. Chibnik also elaborates on increasingly required business reviews and reports as well as the reliance on metrics to assess the journal's impact, both of which he is not in favor of and perceives as part of an audit culture. In addition, he delves into production changes of *AA* during his time as editor-in-chief and into open access publishing.

The final chapter is a look backward and forward. Chibnik writes about the succession of his editorial position and the transition of editorships. He reflects on his likes and dislikes about editing *AA* and comments on recent developments at the journal (under his successor Deborah Thomas), the journal's future and the future of academic journals in general. Chibnik concludes with remarks on his time as editor-in-chief of *AA*, among them his wish of seeing other personal accounts of editing in publishing.

Scholarship, Money, and Prose is a rarity in scope with its trigonal focus on scholarly publishing, work and anthropology. While most titles that portray specific journals are historic accounts, this book's approach is different and certainly an addition to the sparse literature on the day-to-day work in scholarly publishing. The book also admirably contributes to the anthropology of work and just as much to meta-discourse in and about anthropology. Just as the anthropology of work has not all too often focused on its own discipline as a field, meta-discourse in anthropology is not all too often about the daily business of disciplinary journals and its editors. Michael Chibnik manages the balancing act. In great detail, the reader gets to know the nitty gritty and the peculiarities of editorial work. Chibnik also shows how academic knowledge work, in this case in scholarly publishing, is influenced by more or less external requirements (such as the economics of the journal and its governing body, or auditing and assessment of impact) and likewise by internal disciplinary contentions and controversies (such as increasingly complicated and overly field-specific language, or disciplinary debates about current political issues).

The personal facet is a particular strength of the book. Chibnik places himself in the book without becoming the focal point. Chibnik is neither shy of noting where he did well nor of admitting where he made mistakes, while always staying on target of the larger issue he is discussing. It would not be unreasonable to call the book an autoethnographic portrayal of journal editing. For this reason, especially advanced graduate students and junior researchers may find the book a rich resource for background information on the processes at the other end of a submission of a journal article. It would therefore have been delightful if the book had contained more personal advice to authors of submissions.

Recent debates about open access in anthropology are not ignored by Chibnik. He outspokenly discusses the issue and journals that have implemented open access, successfully or not. He is acknowledging the aspiration of open access while critically

noting the lack of practical suggestions on implementation by its proponents in anthropology. His detailed elucidations of how AA operates and why open access is not yet viable are welcome insights and should be acknowledged by advocates of open access. It would however have been encouraging if Chibnik had drafted a possible route to open access for AA given his experiences and in-depth insights.

Chibnik's strong emphasis on the importance of the core work of a journal editor and his realistic stance towards AA's production and its capabilities on adapting to possibilities of digital publication are worthwhile and respectable. Chibnik's belief that academic journals will persist might however prove wrong. Many developments in scholarly publishing forecast a departure from journals as print-era publishing outlets fixed on volumes, issues and pages. While their names may persist, publishing formats may radically change. While Chibnik acknowledges the likelihood of such changes, the question of what then a journal essentially is remains unresolved in the book. So does the question of how AA and anthropology should react to such changes, or if they might even try to inspire them.

Nevertheless, *Scholarship, Money, and Prose* is an insightful first-hand account of editing a scientific journal, which there are not many of. It is of interest to anthropologists in general and to those studying work or practices of scholarly publishing in particular. Michael Chibnik's intelligible writing certainly makes it a compelling read for a broader audience interested in the inner workings of an academic journal as well.

Marc Lange is a librarian at the academic library of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, where his main area of work is open access. He graduated in anthropology from Humboldt-Universität and worked as a subject librarian for anthropology previously.



© 2021 Marc Lange